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ABSTRACT

By the early nineteenth century, religion and social necessity had driven literacy in western Europe and in the United States from an overall level below 20% to about 50% of all men in a little more than two centuries; women had benefited as well. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the state entered the business of education on a large scale. Vast systems of public schools pushed reading and writing among men and women to essentially universal levels throughout western society by the early twentieth century. The classic arguments for literacy include the production of a healthy skepticism, the invitation to participate in a wide and varied new mental world, access to material prosperity, and the acquisition of the functional competence necessary to survive and prosper in, as well as improve, the world. These goals have been realized only in very limited and frustrating ways; in an age in which two-thirds of Americans need assistance with their tax returns, and most require lawyers to guide them through the bureaucracy, functional incapacity affects everyone. Self-directed learning using library facilities is recommended as a remedy to widespread functional incompetence. (DP)

Literacy in Historical Perspective

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Literacy in Historical Perspective

We as literate westerners are the final products of a mass movement, or event, which took place in our society long ago. Between 1600 and 1920 a nearly universal literacy swept across the face of western society. Literacy arrived as a result of three great events: the Protestant reformation, the growing complexity of civil and economic society, and the arrival of mass public schooling in the middle of the nineteenth century. Since these events we have sustained the ability to read and to write among most of the men and women of our contemporary populations. Now, in the United States, we stand at the crest of this achievement and we seek to bring the rest of our population and, by example and by encouragement, to bring the populations of less developed countries through the threshhold of literacy and into the literate world which we already occupy.

What is the nature of our invitation? Out of what motives are we inviting these people into the literate world? What is the nature of that world? How necessary is literacy to them and how much good will it do them? I ask these questions because, from an historian's perspective, literacy appears to have been offered often out of motives of ideological control by a religion or a state eager to manipulate its populace, and acquired, often, by men desperate to keep up with the complexities of an ever more contractual and legalistic world. Whatever intellectual liberation or economic benefits such literacy may or may not have offered, there is a real question as to whether it has ever bestowed that daily, functional competence which men and women have needed to keep pace with their societies. It is, in short, historically speaking a most ambiguous invitation we are offering. Moreover,

some of our proposed beneficiaries are probably intuitively aware of the checkered and questionable history of world literacy.[1]

I

Why, historically, was mass literacy first offered to or acquired by men?

Protestantism gave the initial push toward mass literacy. Where Protestantism prevailed upon the state to establish a system of schools, as in Scotland, in some of the north German states, and in New England, males achieved a nearly universal capacity to read and write by the year 1750. In these otherwise poor and unremarkable societies women appear to have reached a nearly universal reading ability by the same year, entirely without the benefits of these formal Protestant state schools, which women were generally not eligible to attend. In Sweden the Church simply put through a law requiring every priest publicly to examine the reading abilities of every person in his parish annually. Faced with public embarrassment, the Swedes eagerly absorbed the lessons provided by the priests and by literate parishioners (often women), until by 1750 essentially every man and woman in Sweden could read to some degree. Perhaps two-thirds of both sexes received advanced marks in reading in examinations based on complex religious texts. No schools had been required at all.

Elsewhere a more diffuse Protestant impulse with less control over the state nonetheless managed to raise at least the reading abilities of men and women toward mass if not all the way toward universal levels. Presumably, this was done by private schools, by ministers, and by more personal means. There is evidence that in intensely Protestant areas of northern

[1]The studies upon which this paper is based are discussed in the Essay on the Literature, which follows the paper.

England reading, and often basic writing, skills on the part of men had reached the 75% level by 1800. Some such motives may help explain why relatively underdeveloped regions of colonial America, regions which unlike New England had no public and few private schools, nonetheless achieved levels of reading and basic writing as high as two-thirds of all men and substantial reading levels among women. In places the Catholic Church responded to the Protestant challenge, and in some areas of eastern France the Church appears by one means or another to have taught a majority of men and of women to read.

The motive behind this first massive push toward universal literacy was quite simply to aid the population in receiving the true Word of God as ascertained by the Church. The Swedish church law of 1686 said exactly this. The famous New England school law of 1640 observed that "that old deluder, Satan" would otherwise lead the people astray from the truth. The texts used in these largely Protestant literacy programs were restricted to the Bible, to Luther's commentaries, to official proclamations on the order of society under God, and, in one case, to a famous primer which began "A: In Adam's Fall We Sinned All." As we shall see, the motives for mass literacy programs may have changed little since this time, in spite of our vaunted modernity.

Whether the literacy inculcated in the Protestant school and non-school campaigns achieved results other than what the Church had intended is another question. In Sweden a sect called "the readers" (läsare) was formed to read and discuss religious texts other than those approved by the Church and to do this without the guidance of the priests. In New England perhaps even more than elsewhere in America many men read incendiary political pamphlets at the time of the American Revolution. But there were sharp limits to the

revolutionizing impact of human literacy in the context of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Swedish "readers" confined their readings to superorthodox and deeply pious texts. Their "revolution" was merely to goad the established Church with a piety vigorously less conventionalized and more full of human contacts than the usual official religion. The "readers" dared not cross into political revolution, and their social thought, while anti-establishment, was reactionary in that it challenged the Church to re-establish that golden age of mutual concern and relative social equality which "the readers" thought had existed in an idealized past. The same might be said of the pamphleteers of the American Revolution who, insofar as they envisioned much more than simply getting rid of an English King and otherwise retaining the status quo in America, sometimes looked back to a golden age of local self-sufficiency and mutuality which in fact had existed in America but had been hopelessly eroded by real events. Furthermore, my own studies of patterns of charitable giving among literates and illiterates in New England show that the gifts of these "Protestant literates" remained fully as personalistic, local, pious, and alleviative as the gifts of their few remaining illiterate neighbors. Literates in Sweden and in New England, then, did not seem to have been swept into a widely skeptical, politicized mentality which embraced the future and sought to apply charitable gifts to reform or to remake the world. They remained in the past, where one did what one could for suffering. By and large the great majority of literates still attended the churches which had for their own purposes made them literate.

Other forces emerged alongside the Protestant impulse to pull men toward literacy in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries. In large areas of England not noted for their intense Protestant piety, men

learned to read and write in slowly increasing proportions to such a degree that by the early years of the nineteenth century fully two-thirds of all men in England could read and could at least sign their names. Northeastern France achieved similarly high levels of male literacy by the first decades of the nineteenth century, presumably without massive action by the Catholic Church per se. The northeast led the general male literacy trend of France to well above the halfway mark by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Significantly, the regions in question were the most developed regions of England and of France. Only men seem to have benefited from the reading and writing made available in these regions (often by private schools) and this literacy was found predominantly among those occupations most involved in the market economy and so most in need of literacy to meet the demands of the contractual economy as supervised by the evolving legal régime of the state. Artisans "caught" this literacy first. Later, yeoman farmers began to follow artisans toward universal male literacy. Mere husbandmen lagged behind; cottars and women hardly became literate at all. Clearly the demands of a developing society were pulling certain men toward literacy as their occupations dictated.

Curiously, though, there is little evidence of substantial individual economic returns to literacy acquired in these areas and at these times.[2] Artisans and yeomen became widely literate, but in general they did not become distinctly richer. This suggests that men in these and in other regions of the developing western world may have been pulled into literacy

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[2] There were, of course, eventually broad social returns available to all men and women from a literacy which had risen from below 20% to over 50% and which at this level surely facilitated general economic and industrial development.

by the force of a necessity which they could not resist and from which they did not substantially profit. They had to have literacy to survive in a world in which, increasingly, a man had to be able to read and even write a contract, to read the law affecting contracts, to read and to reply to the tax regulations of the state. Men were pulled into this literate world by necessity.

Among these men we find our Benjamin Franklins and erudite Amsterdam artisans, men of a breadth, skepticism, and wit which was surely beginning to be echoed by their country colleagues. Even yeoman farmers could now read the same newspapers as urban artisans. Presumably they could read the satires as well as the legislative announcements. Yet there must remain an air of caution concerning the liberating effects of a literacy acquired in such a context. The same necessity which had compelled literacy probably also dictated the cheese-paring rationality of the cartoon Dutchman. Men who became literate in such a context were trying to survive, not necessarily to remake the world. My own researches show that in areas of colonial America and in England where this sort of economic and legal "pull" literacy appears to have prevailed (as distinguished by its male-only reading and writing and by sharp occupational differences in literacy), literate men remained fully as traditional in their charitable gifts as illiterates of comparable characteristics. They were no more generous; their gifts were equally personalistic, local, pious and merely alleviative. Similarly the books listed in their wills suggest that most of these "pull" literates remained fully as religious in their readings as their brothers elsewhere who had been educated in Protestant schools. When we are dealing with such masses of men, a few thousand secular pamphlets do not go far in a sea of Bibles, biblical commentaries and histories of the Devil. The future seems to have emerged rather slowly from this literacy of necessity.

The one strikingly new behavior of the period was in fact a sharp withdrawal from at least certain forms of charity in England and in America, and this was characteristic both of literate and of illiterate men, and characteristic, incidentally, of both Protestant "push" areas and in economic "pull" literacy areas. It appears from this evidence that all men everywhere in the Anglo-American world were pulling in their horns and husbanding their resources in an age ever more complex, calculating, and cautious. Generosity was increasingly left to the very rich and to the state, who could afford it. Literacy in this sense appears as an epiphenomenon of a wider human reaction to a world ever more complicated and demanding.

We may even ask whether the literacy they received enabled our artisans and yeoman farmers to deal with the evolving necessities of their times. Often, men who had acquired their literacy in such a context of necessity, as well as men educated in Protestant schools elsewhere, seemed to be alarmed by their inability to deal with the realities of a legalistic commercialized economy and a rationalizing central state. In America at the time of the Revolution, as in France at the time of its several subsequent revolutions, and in the Netherlands during the roughly contemporary period of revolutionary agitation there, the literate but less prominent social groups often complained of the mysteries of banking, of credit, of debt, of state-making and of taxation, mysteries conducted by and large by far more sophisticated lawyers, merchants and state bureaucrats who everywhere seemed to gain control of the revolutionary governments and who turned these toward ends not always understood by means even less understood. The reception of Alexander Hamilton's complex economic plan for the new federal union in America is a case in point. It was rejected because its sophisticated manipu-

lations of credit, taxation, and the power of the state were not widely understood, as well as because men disagreed with Hamilton's goals. The opposition tried to prevent the state from moving faster than their understanding. A similar effort to retard the movement of an economy and a state whose manipulations were beyond the understanding of the ordinary, literate man can be seen in the war of the Jacksonians against the Bank of the United States. Neither the struggle against Hamilton's program nor the later war against the Bank succeeded in the long run in dispelling complexities which many literate men still could not grasp. The Populist movement stands as a later monument to their continuing puzzlement.

By the early nineteenth century, then, religion and social necessity had driven literacy in western Europe and in America from an overall level below 20% of all men to around 50% of all men in little more than two centuries. Women had benefited as well, primarily in the area of reading. The spectrum of European literacies looked something like this: New England would be at the top, with very nearly universal reading and at least basic writing for men, possibly matched by Prussia or other north German Protestant states, followed closely by Calvinist Scotland, these followed in turn by the north of England, by northeast France, and by the rest of America excluding slaves, with Sweden's read-but-little-write profile inserted somewhere, then the rest of England, the rest of America including slaves, and the various other and largely southern regions of France and of Germany at ever lower and less well-defined levels of literacy. Again, those areas most interesting to study are not simply those where Protestant schools "pushed" literacy toward universality but those areas in England and especially in France where complex if lesser forces "pulled" forth a fairly high level of literacy at times entirely without direct aid from a religious campaign.

In both contexts there is reason for hesitancy concerning the broad degree of attitudinal modernization, or liberation, and about the general level of functional adequacy bestowed by this unprecedented mass literacy.

In the middle of the nineteenth century the state suddenly entered the business of education on a large scale. Vast systems of public schools pushed reading and writing among men and women to essentially universal levels in England, France, America, Sweden, and indeed throughout western society, by the early twentieth century. Our world, the western world, entered our age, the age of literacy, where we have maintained it ever since. Why? What were the motives of the modern state in moving its populace from mass to universal literacy in fifty years? Was literacy needed economically? The evidence to date is that literacy was not promoted primarily because it was an economic necessity for industry or for the state. In Canada, in the United States, in Sweden, in England, illiterate men could be found occupying technically demanding jobs and being promoted to still more demanding positions while literate brothers remained on the shop floor. There was no industrial literacy gap, for such demand for literacy as existed was probably saturated by populations already 40% to 95% literate before the introduction of modern public schools.[3] Nor did men appear to have demanded literacy in order to improve their incomes; at any rate, the last 20 or 30% of men to become literate were men so low on the social scale as to have little hope of relative economic progress.

Partly, and I shall discuss this later, men and women may have demanded literacy and further education, and the state may have offered these to them,

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[3]The introduction of schools, and of universal literacy, to a society only 20 to 40% literate would be likely to produce genuine social returns, but this was rarely the case in the west, where religion and commercialization usually had pushed literacy far above those levels by the time of industrialization.

out of a desire to achieve the higher competences which the emerging industrial age demanded if citizens were to maintain their economic positions, if they were to have any hope at all of improving these positions, and if they were to survive at all as citizens in the face of the growing power and sophistications of large industry and of the modern legal-bureaucratic state. But more, a whole school of current historians has questioned more deeply the motives of the modern state in offering universal literacy and universal elementary education to its citizens. These historians have observed that Horace Mann, for one, "sold" the idea of public education to industrialists and to the state partly on the grounds that such education would reduce unruly farm boys and unruly immigrants alike to obedient fodder for factory and for the state. "Good citizenship," it was called when we all went to school, and in our time as in Mann's this had heavy overtones of social control at the hands of the Establishment. Certainly in my schools it did. The preface to the 1866 school law in Sweden was quite frank on the reasons for instituting a system of public schools: the aim was to inculcate good morals and a respect for authority in the populace. The public schools in Sweden merely took over the duties so long performed by the state Church. Similar observations on the intentions of the state have been made in France. I will not belabor this point, for it contains more than a grain of truth, and it is by now well established. The school was the practical, moral, and ethical tool of the modern state. We may ask ourselves a thousand times whether the literacy inculcated in the schools of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries bestowed either sufficient functional adequacy to deal with runaway industrialism and a runaway state, or sufficient skepticism and attitudinal liberation to enable persons to emerge as thinking individuals, free of the calming pieties of the new industrial state. The answer, I think, is all around us.

With this background it is small wonder that we survey the literacy programs of developing nations today with a certain apprehension. Consider the "de-institutionalized" mass reading campaigns of recent North Korea, North Vietnam, and Cuba. Without schools, nearly everyone in these countries has learned to read (and some few to write) in a campaign whose reading materials are highly ideological in content. How ironic it is that the representatives of these countries to a recent world literacy conference in Tehran found their closest contact in Egil Johansson, of Umeå University in Sweden, a student of the Swedish Church's ancient reading campaign. The ideological abuses of literacy have been peculiar, and they recur. Nor can we in the modern western world plead entirely innocent of a more subtle version of the same abuses. For this reason the Tehran Declaration which ended the conference was marked by a strong statement of the responsibility of literacy educators to produce a literacy which frees individuals from all, even stately, bondages.

II

In this perspective let us look around us in the present day and consider the classic arguments for what literacy is supposed to produce in men's, and women's minds. Let us ask ourselves what has in fact been produced. What in short do we have to hope for from literacy?

Has literacy produced a liberating skepticism in our minds? This is supposed to be one of the paramount virtues of a world in which the statements of authorities are hardened in print, where they can be dissected with the aid of the equally concrete analyses of other, critical, printed sources. Yes, we are skeptical, and if we are no more skeptical than the half-literate mobs who formed the chief pressure of public opinion in eighteenth-century Britain, at any rate our skepticism is better informed and it is rather

easier to express. Yet the check on our skepticism is in part a school system one of whose duties is to give us conventional social pieties as part and parcel of our literacy. The check on our skepticism is in other senses a literate public which prefers comic books, tabloids, and television to the New Republic or the New York Times. That the former are available, and that men prefer them, is a fact of the new literate world we are about to invite so many to enter. One wonders if the tiny, articulate and informed minority has more than doubled its size in the course of three centuries of increasing literacy. For the rest, literacy may have introduced only volatility, or boredom, a boredom enhanced by an establishment able first to flood its citizens with an overflood of documentation and then to offer them instead the enticements of Batman or Kojak. Skepticism is neither monopolized by the present nor guaranteed by literacy.

Beyond skepticism, literacy is said to invite individuals to participate in a wide and varied new mental world. It is said to replace the rumor-ridden face-to-face contacts of the village with the concretely assessable statements of a variety of sources ranging across the entire human world. It is said to invite the individual judgment to exercise itself, and the individual imagination to soar, entirely without the ready-made restraints of local superstition. Yes, it certainly did this for me. But the counter-weight is Essalen, which expresses literate man's desire not to do quite so much transcending. We crave face-to-face, or body-to-body, contact. The counterpoise is the ability of the popular press and of television's "global village" not only to distract and to absorb but actually to manipulate our literate minds. Never were the shadows on the cave wall more shadowy than on television every night. The literate universe is both more constrained and more superstitious than we had realized.

Has literacy brought us wealth? Only in the sense that, as literacy advanced from an attribute of 10% of the population to a skill of more than 50%, certain men did profit from acquiring it. The economic development of the commercial and industrial revolutions was at crucial points greatly facilitated by this relatively higher level of literacy and so made all men richer. But in general throughout the western world, and especially as literacy surpassed the two-thirds mark, literacy was not so much a way to individual wealth as a preventer of economic and civil poverty. In the face of economic and legal developments you had to have it to survive. God knows, that is more true than ever today.

Have we survived? Has literacy given us that functional competence we need in order to survive in, much less to prosper in and improve, our world? No, not remotely. We are not even close. This is not a joke. Two-thirds of all Americans have to have help with their tax returns. I do, or I would end up either much poorer, repeat, much poorer, or in jail. This is not a joke, and I am in deadly earnest. How many of us can survive without a lawyer? Why do you think the law is the last great profession open to our students and to our children? Above all because society has outrun everyone's functional literacy and we have all come to depend on a new class of scribes, called lawyers, as the only people who are functionally literate in our society. How can we laugh at the peasant woman of three centuries ago, saving her shilling to pay a scribe to write her most intimate thoughts in a letter to her illiterate husband, away at the wars? We are at war every day with a society beyond our capacities, and we must save our shillings for scribes called lawyers, who may or may not link us with some saving reality in a sea of regulations which neither we nor their very administrators can quite understand. Do not tell me that the modern age is functionally literate.

Illiterate men in previous centuries have seemed better able to deal with their societies. It is no surprise that a study done ten years ago by David Harman, and reported in the New York Times, concluded that fifty percent of Americans were functionally illiterate as judged by a very low standard. They could not, without help, fill in Form 1040-A, or complete a driver's license application, or read at the fifth-grade levels employed in most official announcements and forms. Harman very wisely suggested that in truth the figure should be closer to one hundred percent, since as social status rises so do the demands of functional literacy.

III

It is no bowl of flowers we have to offer. Historically speaking literacy is a skill surrounded with dubious motives, haunted by an air of desperation, and marked by limited and rather frustrating gifts. So let us examine our motives, and the motives of our society and institutions, as we offer literacy to those who have not yet joined us. Let us ask what it is we offer, really, if not a meaningless threshhold in a continuing share in the functional incapacity which afflicts us all. If not brainwashed in the schools, distracted by T.V. or overwhelmed by the popular press, the new literates will join us in a continuing struggle for human competence.

Yet it is vital that we continue to struggle. It is vital that we invite others to join us in the struggle. Not to do so would be cynical beyond belief. And it would be disastrous. Out of misguided motives, during the late nineteen sixties and early seventies many young teachers in Sweden (as in the U.S. and elsewhere) de-emphasized basic literacy skills. They did this in the belief that literacy was simply a tool of the oppressive state, and in full realization of the difficulties of achieving true individual

competence. In their eyes the only hope of affecting the state was through mass actions which relied not on literacy but on ideology, on numbers, and on civil disobedience. They sought to foster not literacy but a genuine human solidarity in their students. The results are now in. The upper and middle class students in these classes became highly literate under the influence of their families. It was the working-class students who achieved both solidarity and illiteracy and who consequently did badly in subsequent courses and were shut out of the higher educational system almost entirely. Abandoning literacy, with the best of motives, only sharpened class differences. The solidarity of illiteracy simply did not work.

What we need instead and what we gain instead, from the perspective of history, is the solidarity of literacy, a de-ideologized literacy defined as that continuing struggle for human competence in which we all partake. We invite illiterates to join us literates in the struggle which our first literate ancestors took up centuries ago, the struggle to understand and deal with modern society and with the modern state. We are in the face of this struggle all illiterates. If they promise to learn to read and to write, we shall promise in turn not to give up ourselves to the latter-day scribes called lawyers, and not to allow the public airwaves to be abused so as to distract us all from our task by reducing us all to gabbling, hysterical animals in the model of Mork and Mindy. The role of libraries in this mutual struggle for a truly functioning literacy is obvious. Here in our common meeting ground we can come together without social or moral models which try to bend our minds into common paths convenient for the state. Here is a place where so-called "illiterates" and so-called "literates" can come together to advance their mutual pursuits of enrichment and of adequacy in quiet and in calm. In one room men and women struggle to

repair the damages of an inadequate school system by learning to read, and to write. Later, in another room, these and other men and women learn from a lawyer how to deal with the bureaucracy without lawyers. In the familiar environment of our libraries we might together achieve that knowledge which mere literacy once promised, and that truce with the state which is the most modern man can hope for. This is a literacy for our age, and for all of us.